# Maintaining the Parish Register : Advice for Congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

## The Parish Register

The *Model Constitution for Congregations* stipulates that the pastor of a congregation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, "shall keep accurate parochial records of all baptisms, confirmations, marriages, burials, communicants, members received, members dismissed, or members excluded from the congregation; shall submit a summary of such statistics annually to the synod . . ." (*C9.12.a. and b.). These guidelines are prepared to assist pastors and other congregational leaders in their task of keeping a parish register.

### Care

Never leave your parish register vulnerable to destruction. Keeping a copy of the parish register in the same or another format will provide **security** for it today. However, for long term **preservation** you must select a format that is not dependent on hardware and software, that quickly become obsolete, in order to read it. For legal and historical purposes, consider one of the following means of securing your parish register:

#### *Duplication and dispersal*

1. Maintain the traditional parish register in addition to the electronic database.
2. Print out once each year on acid-free paper the necessary reports that constitute a parish register and care for them as you would the traditional parish register.
3. Have microfilm copies of your parish register made at reasonable intervals.
4. Scan or take digital photographs of the pages of the parish register.
5. Record all changes, such as accessions, transfers, deaths, or removal for inactivity, in the minutes of the annual Congregational Meeting.

### Retention

A duplicate copy in one of the above formats should be kept at a remote location, preferably a bank safe deposit box. Remember that digital information is not preserved by accident. If these methods are used, you must commit to

reformatting the files as hardware and software change.

For additional information on the pros and cons of each of these formats please see the document, *A Comparison of Microfilming and Digital Preservation Technologies*.

## Becoming a Member

***People are received into membership in a congregation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in one of the following ways :***

### Baptism (Infant)

An individual becomes a member of the congregation the day the Sacrament of Holy Baptism is administered. If the immediate family members hold membership in another congregation, the child's membership should be transferred to that congregation. If a child, whose parents or guardians are members of your congregation, was baptized in another congregation, request transfer of the child's membership from that congregation.

If the child was baptized in an emergency situation, the date of that administration of the sacrament is entered into the parish register. It is recommended that the order for "Public Recognition of Baptism" (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship: Occasional Services for the Assembly*, page 69) be conducted in the congregation when the health of the child allows.

Traditionally the parish register includes the following information related to Baptisms:

- **Name and birth date of the child**
- **Names of parents, including the maiden name of the mother (and an explanation of any hyphenated names)**
- **Names of sponsors**
- **Date of Baptism**
- **Name of the presiding minister**

## Baptism (Adult)

The Sacrament of Holy Baptism is administered to adults following a period of instruction in the Christian faith. In the case of adults, the date of Baptism is recorded in the parish register under both "baptism" and "confirmation," as the newly baptized adult becomes simultaneously a confirmed member and a voting member of the congregation.

## Affirmation of Baptism (Confirmation)

Confirmed members of the congregation are baptized persons who have publicly affirmed their baptismal covenant, following a period of instruction, and upon the approval of the Congregation Council (*C8.03.). Such instruction should include information regarding what it means to become a member of a Lutheran congregation. Confirmed members also are those who have been received by adult baptism (see above), "or by transfer as confirmed members from other Lutheran congregations, or baptized persons received by affirmation of faith" (*C8.02.). Upon affirmation of baptism, the person also becomes a voting member of the congregation.

The date entered into the parish register is the date on which the person publicly reaffirms the vows of baptism in the presence of the congregation, or the date on which the person was approved for membership by the Congregation Council in the event no public service was conducted.

## Transfer of Membership

When a person holding membership in another Lutheran congregation seeks to become a member of your congregation, that person should request in writing a letter of transfer to your congregation. If the letter has not arrived in a prescribed time, you may wish to telephone that congregation to provide a reminder. You may appropriately request the following information with the letter:

- **Date and place of Baptism**
- **Date and place of Confirmation**
- **How received into the congregation and when**

The date entered into the parish register is normally the date on which the person is received publicly into the congregation through "Reception of Lutherans by Transfer" (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship: Occasional Services*, page 89). In the event that no public order was used, the date entered into the parish register is the date the letter of transfer was issued.

If the person seeking membership in your congregation holds membership in a non-Lutheran congregation, a letter of transfer or release may not necessarily be issued, but you may request one. A period of instruction normally precedes reception into membership. The date entered into the parish register is the date on which the rite of Affirmation of Baptism (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, pages 234ff) was conducted. If no public rite was used, the date entered into the parish register is the date of the meeting of the Congregation Council at which the member was received.

If the person seeking membership in your congregation is received from a congregation that recently has dissolved, the information listed above may be obtained from the parish register of the dissolved congregation; that parish register is located in the archives of the synod or of this church. The date entered into the parish register is the date on which the rite of Affirmation of Baptism (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, pages 234ff) was conducted. If no public rite is used, the date entered into the parish register is the date of the meeting of the Congregation Council at which the member was received.

## Associate Members

Associate members "are persons holding membership in other Lutheran [Christian] congregations who wish to retain such membership but desire to participate in the life and mission of this congregation" (*C8.02.d.). Such members may participate in all aspects of the congregation's life except voting, and are not eligible for elected offices. The date entered into the parish register is the date on which the rite of Affirmation of Baptism (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, pages 234ff) was conducted. If no public rite is used, the date entered into the parish register is the date of the meeting of the Congregation Council at which the member was received.

## Restoration to Membership

People, who once were confirmed members of a Lutheran congregation, but later became inactive, are received into your congregation by Affirmation of Baptism (Restoration to Membership). Persons who are inactive members of a non-Lutheran congregation are received as members of your congregation by Affirmation of Baptism, normally following a period of instruction (see above).

The date entered into the parish register is normally the date on which such persons were publicly received through the rite of Affirmation of Baptism [Restoration to Membership] (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, pages 234ff).

## Termination of Membership

***Membership in a congregation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is terminated in one of the following ways :***

### Death

Traditionally the parish register includes the following information concerning the death of a member of the congregation:

- **Date and place of death**
- **Cause of death**
- **Date and place of funeral or memorial service(s)**
- **Date and place of interment**
- **Name of the presiding minister**

The same information may be provided for non-members at whose funeral the pastor serves as presiding minister. The parish register should indicate whether the deceased is a member or a non-member.

While the use of an electronic database at once necessitates that the name of the deceased is removed from the roll of members of the congregation, the parish register retains the name, indicating as much of the information above as possible.

### Resignation

A member of the congregation may choose to resign membership in the congregation by means of a letter addressed to the Congregation Council or to the pastor. Notice of receipt of a letter of resignation may be printed in the minutes of the Congregation Council meeting, in a summary of Congregation Council actions printed in the parish newsletter, and in the minutes of the annual Congregational Meeting. The entry in the parish register reflects the date on the letter of resignation.

While the use of an electronic database necessitates that the name of the person who resigned be removed at once from the roll of members of the congregation, the parish register retains the name, indicating the date of resignation.

## Transfer or Release

When a member of the congregation seeks to join another Lutheran congregation, that individual requests that a letter of transfer be issued. The letter normally includes the following information:

- **Birth date and place**
- **Baptism date and congregation**
- **Confirmation date and congregation**
- **Marriage history**

When a member of the congregation seeks to join a non-Lutheran congregation, a decision must be made whether to issue a letter of transfer or a letter of release. A letter of release contains the same information as a letter of transfer. The bylaws of the congregation may indicate the conditions under which a letter of release is issued rather than a letter of transfer. The bylaws of the congregation also may indicate whether a letter of transfer or release must be approved by the Congregation Council.

The parish register reflects the date on which Congregation Council action was taken, or, if Congregation Council action is not required, the date on which the letter of transfer or the letter of release was written.

While the use of an electronic database necessitates that the names of those who have transferred be removed at once from the roll of members of the congregation, the parish register retains the name, indicating the date of transfer or release.

## Disciplinary Action

The discipline of members of a congregation is governed by the provisions of chapter 15 of the *Model Constitution for Congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America* and by Chapter 20 of the *Constitution, Bylaws, and Continuing Resolutions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*. Notice of suspension from membership for a definite period of time, or exclusion from membership in the congregation, is delivered to the member in writing. The parish register reflects the date on which the suspension or

exclusion took effect.

A member under discipline is not granted a letter of transfer or a letter of release to another congregation. In the event such a letter is requested, a letter indicating that the person is under discipline appropriately may be sent.

While the use of an electronic database necessitates that the name of the member who is suspended or removed from membership be removed at once from the roll of members of the congregation, the parish register retains the name, indicating the date of suspension or removal as part of the permanent record.

When the member seeks re-instatement to the congregation, the decision to reinstate rests with the Congregation Council (*C15.05.). The date of reinstatement entered into the parish register is normally the date on which the person was publicly received through the rite of Affirmation of Baptism [Restoration to Membership] (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, pages 234ff).

## Removal from the Roll due to Inactivity

A definition of "inactivity" may be included in the bylaws of the congregation. Such definitions normally are framed to reflect a failure to engage in the privileges and duties of members of the congregation, which include, but are not limited to, regular use of the means of grace, living a life in accordance with the Word of God, and supporting the mission and ministry of the congregation, the synod, and this church (*C8.05.e.).

Removal of a member of a congregation for inactivity occurs only after repeated attempts, over a period of at least two years, to ascertain whether the member desires to have his or her name removed from the roll of the congregation. Removal from the roll of the congregation is by action of the Congregation Council upon recommendation of the pastor. Notice of removal from the roll of membership in the congregation is recorded in the minutes of the Congregation Council and in the minutes of the annual Congregational Meeting. It also may be published, if it is the congregation's custom, in the parish newsletter or bulletin. The parish register reflects the date on which the removal was approved by the Congregation Council.

While the use of an electronic database necessitates that the

name of the person be removed at once from the listing of members of the congregation, the parish register retains the name, indicating the date on which the person was removed from active membership. Such a procedure respects the desire of this church that these people ". . . shall remain persons for whom the church has a continuing pastoral concern." (*C8.05.)

Normally a person removed from the roster of members is not granted a letter of transfer or release. A letter indicating the dates of baptism, confirmation, marriage history, and the fact that the individual has been inactive in the life of the congregation may be issued, affording the new congregation the opportunity to receive the member by reaffirmation of faith.

## Other Records

### Marriage

The parish register traditionally contains the following information related to marriages conducted in the congregation:

- **Name and birth date (baptismal date) of the bride**
- **Name and birth date (baptismal date) of the groom**
- **Names of witnesses**
- **Date of the wedding**
- **Name of the presiding minister**

Pastors are cautioned not to enter the information related to marriages into the parish register or to sign any legal documents until the wedding ceremony has been completed.

### Voting Members

The parish register may contain a list of the voting members of the congregation. Voting members are defined by the Model Constitution for Congregations as "members who are confirmed members. Such confirmed members shall have communed and made a contribution of record during the current or preceding year" (*C.8.02.c.). The parish register may contain the date on which the member became a voting member, either by Affirmation of Baptism [Confirmation] or by letter of transfer from another congregation (see above).

### Communicants

In many congregations, persons are admitted to the Sacrament of Holy Communion prior to Affirmation of Baptism [Confirmation]. Reception of Holy Communion often follows a period of instruction appropriate to the age level of the member and after consultation with the pastor and the parents. The parish register may list the date on which the member first received Holy Communion

***See also these additional guidelines . . .***

*Records Management Manual for Congregations*
*Maintaining the Parish Register: Advice for Congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*
*Congregational Treasurers Financial & Accounting Guide*
*Certification of Congregation Records at the Time of a Pastoral Transition (form)*
*Disposition of Records for Disbanding Congregations*
*A Brief Guide for Archives of Congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*
*The Work of a Congregational Archivist and/or Archives Committee*.
*Comparison of Microfilming and Digital Preservation Technologies*.

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